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# 14 Reasons To Visit This Under-The-Radar Florida Gem



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*I cover adventure, luxury and family travel.*

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Islands West Resort villas are a stone's throw from Holmes Beach on Anna Maria Island. EVERETT MARC

The Bradenton-Anna Maria Island-Longboat Key area is located on Florida’s west coast between St. Petersburg and Sarasota. It is bordered on the north by Tampa Bay and to the west by the Gulf of Mexico. Many people feel that this region has successfully preserved the characteristics of “Old Florida.”

It's a slower pace, a more relaxed vibe and free of the crowds that flock to other popular touristy regions in the state. Even though it's easy to fly into—Sarasota Bradenton International Airport (SRQ) offers direct flights on Delta, JetBlue, United and American—this region still feels off the beaten path.

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Families often come back year after year to this under-the-radar Florida gem.

## **Where to Stay**





AMI Lemonfish at Islands West Resort EVERETT MARC

**AMI Limefish at Islands West Resort** is located in the heart of Holmes Beach on Anna Maria Island—close to shops, restaurants, and less than a five-minute stroll to the Gulf of Mexico beach. Four separate buildings, each with two individual villas, surround the shared outdoor “living room” with a heated pool to create a private resort feel. There are barbecue grills, loungers, and comfy couches open only to Islands West Resort guests.

What’s really nice is that families and friends have the flexibility to rent separate villas to accommodate multiple families or couples—everyone can meet up at the pool but have their own accommodations. The villas are available as one- and two-bedrooms as well as studio units. Each villa has beach chairs, umbrellas, and a wagon to be used at the beach (or near the pool). Another really unique feature is the keyless check in—each villa has its own unique door code that changes after each stay. There’s also a dedicated on-site parking space for each villa (which is especially important since parking can be tricky).



The villas are ideal for families. EVERETT MARC

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This resort, part of the AMI Locals Luxury Vacation Rentals portfolio, has cozy yet bright interiors and the exterior central space has a very inviting tropical vibe. Islands West Resort was completely renovated in 2019 from an existing Old Florida–style property to a modern accommodation.

Each villa also has a full-size refrigerator, dishwasher, oven/stove, and washer/dryer. It makes it great for families who want to cook their own meals or pack light and wash their clothes at will.

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This is an ideal spot for families

One of the biggest draws is that the beach is literally two blocks away. The concierge can recommend activities on Anna Maria Island.

Anna Maria Island is an amazing destination, yet not many people know about it. The island boasts seven miles of uninterrupted beach and there are no chain restaurants or high-rise buildings—all buildings measure three stories or less.

## Food



Fresh Gulf oysters along with a signature Bloody Mary is a favorite combo at Anna Maria Oyster Bar.  
PETER ACKER

[Anna Maria Oyster Bar on the Pier](#) is one of four locations throughout the Bradenton area. The pier location offers stunning views of the Intracoastal Waterway. Guests arrive by car, boat, and even golf-cart shuttle. The fun, friendly atmosphere is directly related to the warm spirit of hospitality the

staff embodies. Popular dishes include the freshly caught local grouper—it can be served on a bun as a sandwich or plated and served as an entrée. Pair it with one of their award-winning margaritas or, a Pier favorite, the White Sandy Beaches cocktail, which is made with Svedka vanilla vodka, Cruzan coconut rum, pineapple and cranberry juice. There’s nothing more medicinal than a margarita and fresh Florida seafood while sitting on the water to put you in vacation mode. The restaurant embodies the traditional Aloha spirit of hospitality blended with today’s Anna Maria Island flavors.



The Beach House has an enviable location right on the sand. STEPHEN SWETT

The [Beach House](#) is another island favorite. It’s owned by Ed Chiles, who took over the property in 1993 and completely revamped the menu to focus on food sustainability and local partnerships. Chiles’s mission is to change the way restaurants contribute to the local food system. The menu centers around local produce and local partnerships—whether that’s a fisherman on Anna Maria Island, clam farmers in Tampa Bay, or designing entire dishes from the seasonal harvest of their 100 percent USDA-certified organic farm, Gamble Creek Farm. Of course, the setting is another big draw. The

restaurant has over 650 feet of immaculate beach views overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. Fan favorite dishes include the stone crabs (caught locally), the fresh-picked salad greens (from Gamble Creek Farm) and the fresh-caught fish of the day.



Try some of the best cheesecake in Florida. THE CHEESECAKE CUTIE & CAFÉ

Want to enjoy some of the best cheesecake in Florida, if not the whole country? Then head to [The Cheesecake Cutie & Café](#). Owners Jennifer R. Geils and Devan Maize launched this adorable—and delicious—café in Anna Maria Island in November 2020. The original B's cheesecake cutie is Geils' mom's recipe that dates back 40 years. There are dozens of flavors (and they are constantly adding more). Each cutie (think of a cupcake-size cheesecake)

is the perfect portion for a snack or dessert. Everyone has their fan favorite. Grandma’s Key Lime always sells out and is most requested, but other favorites include Peanut Butter Dream, Chocolate Delight, Chocolate Chip, Salted Caramel, Snickers, and Blueberry Lemon. They are so delicious that after sampling them, people often order a dozen to go to share with friends and family. (You’ll be the favorite, for sure.) In addition to cheesecake, the café serves lunch with includes a variety of sandwiches, flatbreads, and salads. The Greek and Italian salad dressings are family recipes that date back for decades (and are delicious).



The fish tacos are a big hit. SEAFOOD SHACK, MARINA, BAR & GRILL

**Seafood Shack, Marina, Bar & Grill** was built in 1971 on the sunny sea side of Cortez—a fishing village nicknamed “The Kitchen” by many residents for its wealth of fish, scallops, and other delicious seafood. The vibrant shoreline of Cortez became the gorgeous backdrop to what is now a true classic in American seafood dining. Popular dishes include fish tacos and fried grouper bites. The tacos are made with blackened fresh local fish with aged



cheddar cheese, cabbage, Baja sauce, and pico de gallo in a soft taco shell. The grouper bites are served with fresh lemon and tartar sauce. While most people arrive by car, arriving via boat is quite the experience. Located on the Intracoastal Waterway at Marker 49A, the Seafood Shack Marina is fully accommodating with 68 deep-water and sailboat-safe slips. There's two hours of complimentary "parking" while diners enjoy their waterfront dinner.

**Scott's Deli** has a great selection of sandwiches, salads, and breakfast items—a great option if you want to pack a picnic for the beach. Everything is made fresh to order. Breakfast favorites include the steak-and-egg sandwich and the avocado toast. Kids will love the create-your-own-hotdogs (with options like bacon, corn, or chili powder). Sandwich lovers have plenty of choices in both hot and cold offerings as well as make-your-own specials. Other favorites include the street tacos and salads. (The Southwest salad is a popular choice.)



The Grove has an extensive menu of food items as well as a craft bar. GROVE

**Grove** restaurant opened just a few years ago (December 2018) but has quickly become a popular spot. They have an expansive menu with the focus on locally sourced ingredients made from scratch in the kitchen. The craft bar is a big draw and has unique infusions and four types of house-made bitters. The bar itself is a great place to take in the vibe of the restaurant and interact with locals. Some of the most popular dishes are the crab cakes, scallops benedict, ahi tuna nachos, and prime rib (offered Friday and Saturday nights).



The crab cakes are one of the most popular dishes at Libby's. LIBBY'S NEIGHBORHOOD BRASSERIE

**Libby's Neighborhood Brasserie** located in Lakewood Ranch has both indoor and outdoor seating. The waitstaff is super hospitable and the food is served up with a smile. Popular dishes include the meatballs, chicken carbonara, mussels, ribs, and signature steaks.

## Activities

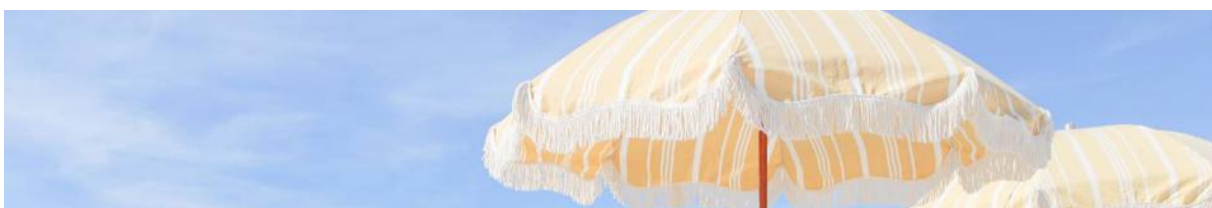
**Beach Bums** on Anna Maria Island offers kayak, bike, golf cart, and SUP rentals. They also offer guided kayak tours, which are a real highlight for many families. Paddling along the red mangroves and into Anna Maria Sound, it's possible to see dolphins. When the tour continues under the Key

Royale Bridge and into Bimini Bay, there's a chance of spotting manatees. Stops include a bird rookery, where roseate spoonbills, blue herons and white egrets can be found; Mangrove Island, where people can wade in the seagrass to view fish eggs, hermit crabs, and jumping mullets; and the oyster shoal.



Many kids (and adults) love the ziplines on the course. TREEUMPH ADVENTURE COURSE

**TreeUmph! Adventure Course** is a full-day adventure on five progressively challenging courses. Set on an expansive park over ten football fields in size, kids (ages seven and older) and adults can climb and play on over 100 obstacles from beginner level to extreme, including Tarzan ropes, bridges, swinging logs, cargo nets, and zip lines. What's especially nice about this activity is that it's fun, outdoors, and inspires confidence and pride through adventure. Many kids (and adults!) leave feeling accomplished and proud of what they were able to achieve.





Beach Suites makes a day at the beach stress-free. BEACH SUITES

**Beach Suites**, run by owners Tiffany Adell and Audrey McLoughlin (who are also sisters-in-law), is a new business (they started operating in October 2020) that has really hit the ground running and to great success. It's a luxury beach setup experience that requires no work. (Everything is set up when you arrive, and they clean up when you leave.) Each beach suite experience includes setup and cleanup, wood and canvas adjustable lounge chairs, umbrellas, both still and sparkling water and a cooler with ice, sunscreen, hand sanitizer, first-aid kit, beach towels, beach blankets and ground pillows, Bluetooth speaker, portable phone charger, giant games like Connect Four and cornhole, paddleball, trash can and trash removal. You book the number of people and the beach suites team does everything else. It's the most stress-free day at the beach imaginable (and any family with kids knows that's priceless). It's a wonderful setup for a day at the beach—be it with friends, family, or a romantic partner. They book a variety of suites for guests ranging in sizes from two to eight people. They also offer beach suites for groups larger than eight for special events. The experience can be set up during the day between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. or a three-hour sunset experience.

**Paradise Boat Tours** offers families a chance to get out on the water and enjoy views of the coastline from the comfort of a boat. This 90-minute

narrated wildlife tour has a very good chance of seeing dolphins. There's also a possibility to view manatees, rays, and other wildlife.



The Fish Hole Mini Golf at Lakewood Ranch JUDY KOUTSKY

The [Fish Hole Mini Golf](#) at Lakewood Ranch has 18 holes that are both fun and challenging. The large pond is stocked with koi and many other fish, and the Turtle Pond is especially fun for kids. Kids (and adults) can grab a handful of food and feed them all. Cool-water misters are located throughout the course to help keep golfers from getting too hot. They also have a mini golf location on Anna Maria Island.

For a little R&R on the beach, the [Sea-renity Beach Spa](#) offers massages on the beach in a tiki hut. It's a unique—and relaxing—experience while enjoying Florida's Gulf Coast. A popular choice is the mermaid package for two at sunset. Owner Amanda Escobio, who has been a massage therapist for more than 25 years, started beach massages 12 years ago and it's still going strong.

Check out my *website*.



**Judy Koutsky**

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